

FOREWORD

In 2005, August 25-27, an inaugural workshop was held at Tilburg University in the Netherlands under the acronym of LESLLA: Low-Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition. The workshop focused on multiple Ls, as explained in the introductory chapter of this book. The primary goal of the workshop was to establish an international forum on research and classroom issues pertaining to the second language acquisition and literacy development of adults with little or no native language schooling. Such an enterprise only can succeed on the basis of a common, international interest in acquisition research, in adult literacy development, and in conducting basic research in classroom settings.

The presentations given during the workshop provided compelling reasons for setting up a broader international forum. The contributions to this book provide persuasive evidence in written form, as one may expect from research meetings. Another important outcome was that other persons were willing to organize the next forum. In 2006 the Literacy Institute at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond will host in November a four-day forum with presentations by well-known international researchers, authors, linguists, and practitioners. LESLLA appears to have a future. The LESLLA group meanwhile has an official website as well: www.leslla.org. The website makes a clear statement about what LESLLA is and about its goal:

Low-Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition (LESLLA) for Adults is an international forum of researchers who share an interest in research on the development of second language skills by adult immigrants with little or no schooling prior to resettling in the country of entry.

The goal of LESLLA is to share empirical research findings and information to guide further research on second language acquisition for the low-educated adult immigrant population worldwide. This research in turn will provide guidance to education policy development in all those countries in which immigrants settle and most need educational support.

The introductory chapter of this book refers to the report of UNESCO 2004 to state the urgency of the problem of literacy. Statistics show that more than 800 million adult individuals worldwide are not literate, and two-thirds are women. Furthermore, it is well-known that poor language proficiency and low literacy levels in L1 and/or L2 have a strong effect on the proficiency levels attained in later generations. Oral and written proficiency levels not only show a skewed distribution worldwide across countries, but modern societies also face large differences between in-groups. Large scale processes of displacement and migration imply that no country can any longer deny the problem of low-educated adults, adult second language acquisition and low literacy levels. It is no longer an external problem, for no one, wherever (s)he lives.

We need bottom-up research in language acquisition and literacy development. University students are equipped and motivated learners of second languages, but they are trained to learn, using all written knowledge sources available, including digital resources and tools. We can not generalize research results obtained from them to groups that have very low levels of schooling or have no schooling at all. LESLLA has the potential to unite international forces for expanding fundamental and practical research.

Roeland van Hout

Representing the Board of Humanities of the Dutch National Science Foundation